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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

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JOHN KEAST, STAFF DIRECTOR
DAVID STRICKLAND, DEMOCRATIC STAFF DIRECTOR

March 5, 2020

The Honorable Ajit Pai
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th St., SW
Washington, D.C. 20554

Dear Chairman Pai:

Since COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan, China, last year, the virus has spread to over 50 countries, including the United States, and infected over 90,000 people. Here in the U.S., the outbreak has infected several of my constituents in Washington state with unfortunate loss of life. Tireless workers in Washington and across the country are treating patients and working to contain the spread of COVID-19, including through quarantines and by closing certain facilities like schools.

I believe that the Federal Communications Commission ("FCC") is uniquely positioned to respond to some of the challenges posed by COVID-19 just as it has in the past with disaster response. To that end, I urge you to consider how the FCC's existing authority and programs, as well as temporary policies or rule waivers, may be used to secure the nation's safety and continued well-being.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, for example, the FCC adopted temporary rules to allow rural and non-rural health care providers, including Red Cross shelters providing health care services, to apply for support for advanced telecommunications and information services for telemedicine. Taking similar actions with respect to COVID-19 may allow new or temporary health care facilities tasked with responding to this disease to take advantage of FCC program resources to secure access to connectivity, if and where necessary.

In addition, to facilitate remote monitoring of isolated and quarantined patients (especially low-income patients), I urge you to consider what temporary measures the FCC can take to pave the way for connected care between these patients and health care professionals. To this end, the FCC has a pilot proposal outstanding that is designed to help address the cost of connected care for low-income consumers. I urge you to consider how this effort or other temporary policies can be part of a nationwide response to COVID-19.

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Finally, there already have been weeks-long school closures in Washington state and it is likely that other school closures of uncertain duration will occur around the country. I request that the FCC consider whether temporary measures using its authority under section 254 of the Communications Act of 1934 could be used to facilitate at-home connectivity for students to keep up in class should remote schoolwork become necessary due to COVID-19 closures.

Thank you for your attention to this important situation. Please provide a response to this letter as soon as possible and in no event later than March 15, 2020.

Sincerely,



MARIA CANTWELL
Ranking Member

cc: The Honorable Jessica Rosenworcel, The Honorable Michael O'Rielly, The Honorable Geoffrey Starks, The Honorable Brendan Carr